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Resurrect Your Darlings: Falstaff's Death(s), Resurrection(s), and Lasting Influence

Marcia Eppich-Harris (Marian University)

For about 100 years, young writers have been coached with the following advice: "Kill your darlings."¹ What it means is: don't get too attached to any one character or plot line or scenario or particularly flowery description. Sometimes the thing that you love the most in your own writing is not what is "good" for your writing. Sometimes writers have to change course in order to reach a particular outcome. And sometimes it only seems like a writer changes course. Great writers kill their darlings all the time, in a variety of ways for a variety of effects, but sometimes they also use these "deaths" as red herrings.

When important characters die in literature, authors make the choice to kill them. Although death is inevitable in life, it is not inevitable in literature. One of the most examined deaths in Shakespeare is the death of the great comic character Falstaff. When considering one's options as a writer, it's important to note that, even in writing a history play, there are a plethora of options about how one can achieve a desired effect. Shakespeare could have let Falstaff disappear into the countryside. He could have continued the tetralogy with Falstaff in a comic role, much like the previous plays. He could have cast Falstaff as the Chorus, which is a creative option I'd very much like to contemplate further and to see performed at some point. But instead of allowing Falstaff to ride off into the sunset or retire to a cave like Jacques in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare chooses to kill Falstaff in *Henry V*. The question is: why?

I think the answer lies in the fact that Shakespeare uses Falstaff as a highly symbolic character throughout the series. Hugh Grady and others have spoken of Falstaff as the symbol of carnival,² but bearing in mind the prodigality theme of the second tetralogy, I would like to argue more specifically that Shakespeare uses Falstaff as a specialized version of the prodigal son in order to subvert the concepts of both honor and the Machiavellian power utilized by the Lancasters. Falstaff is not just any prodigal son. Falstaff, remember, had been a part of the mainstream court at one time, as Shallow reports in *2 Henry IV* having served as a page to Thomas Mowbray, the Duke of Norfolk.³ At some point, Falstaff gives up the court. We don't know when. It's possible that Falstaff turned tail when Richard II was deposed, like Hal, but there's no evidence of that. Significantly, though, unlike Hal, Falstaff neither pretends to be a prodigal, nor does he truly repent it. He jokes about redeeming himself many times, to great comic effect, but he never does. Falstaff's wholehearted commitment to the prodigal life acts as a subversive force in the plays, and then, when Shakespeare kills Falstaff, that subversion doesn't go away. People die, but ideas don't have to. Even as Shakespeare kills him off, Falstaff's memory and his subversive force are momentarily resurrected again and again throughout *Henry V*.

The reader may recall that Falstaff's recurring "resurrection" in *Henry V* is not the first time Falstaff has metaphorically "died" and "risen again." Alice Lyle Scoufos points out that Falstaff seems to die, but escapes death several times – a fact that wrongly convinces the audience of Falstaff's immortality.⁴ We witness Falstaff's death for the first time in *1 Henry IV*, when rather than continuing to fight Douglas, Falstaff drops – seemingly – dead. Falstaff's death at Shrewsbury is incredibly effective the first time you see the play, especially because it is so conventional for characters to drop dead

in early modern drama that it's all too feasible that Falstaff is not counterfeiting. Hal gives a brief eulogy, both sweet and mocking, but when Falstaff rises from the dead, the audience feels not confusion but relief.⁵ It's bad form to kill off comedic characters, notwithstanding the advice to "kill your darlings," because killing comedic characters changes the tone of the play. In *1 Henry IV*, Shakespeare seems to understand that killing Falstaff at this point in the series would cast a pall over Hal's victory at Shrewsbury. So instead, Shakespeare keeps the laughs coming through resurrecting not a savior, but a sinner. Falstaff has a perfectly good explanation for his fake death: "The better part of valour is discretion, in the which better part, I have saved my life" (5.4.117-8).

Wit is Falstaff's greatest property, and his quick thinking makes for a number of amusing escape routes time and again. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff tries to convince us that he nearly dies from drowning when Mistress Ford's men dump him in the Thames after carrying him out in a large laundry basket:

'Sblood, the rogues slighted me into the river with as little remorse as they would have drowned a blind bitch's puppies, fifteen i'th' litter! And you may know by my size that I have a kind of alacrity in sinking. If the bottom were as deep as hell, I should down. I had been drowned, but that the shore was shelvy and shallow – a death that I abhor, for the water swells a man, and what a thing should I have been when I had been swelled? By the Lord, a mountain of mummy! (3.5.7-15)

Here, Falstaff contemplates his own death with comedic results. We laugh at his self-deprecation, not at the idea that Falstaff can and will die. The humor rates well with the audience's sense of denial, since of course, there is a certain amount of denial that we all prefer to live in when it comes to matters of mortality.

Additionally, another simulated life-or-death situation occurs in act 5, scene 5, of *Merry Wives*. Falstaff fears for his life when he sees the other characters in the forest where he's gone to meet Mistress Ford. "They are fairies," he says when he spies them. "He that speaks to them shall die. I'll wink and couch, no man their works must eye" (5.5.44-5). Despite his attempt to escape through trickery, the faux-fairies attack, burning and pinching Falstaff in a ritual of torment. The scene is filled with deer imagery, and there is a sense that Falstaff stands in as a sacrificial victim. But again, Shakespeare pulls the punch before the violence becomes too brutal to be funny. Falstaff recognizes that he is "made an ass" (line 115), but at the end of the play, he boasts, "I am glad, though you have ta'en a special stand to strike at me, that your arrow hath glanced" (5.5.211-12). Once again, Falstaff acknowledges that he has escaped with his life.

Shakespeare's repeated attempts at killing Falstaff or simulating his death delight the audience because they make us believe that Falstaff is invulnerable. Even though scholars are quick to point out that Falstaff's rejection was inevitable, they do not acknowledge just how unlikely it seems to audiences who have seen Falstaff wriggle his way out of troubling circumstances time and again – some which could be fatal – and how he rarely, if ever, faces significant consequences prior to the rejection scene. Considering the precedence Shakespeare sets up, it's possible, or maybe even

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probable, that the audience would expect Falstaff to escape not only banishment, but death itself. Much to our dismay, he doesn't.

Hal's rejection, though, is not as harsh as it could have been. Hal gives Falstaff a means to live in order to keep him from the prodigal path:

For competence of life I will allow you,
That lack of means enforce you not to evil:
And, as we hear you do reform yourselves,
We will, according to your strengths and qualities,
Give you advancement. (5.5.64-8)

In this gesture, Hal tries to coerce a reformation of Falstaff's character – forcing the prodigal to “reform” himself. The problem lies in the fact that Falstaff's subjectivity is founded in his prodigality. Reform the prodigal, and what's left of Falstaff?

While Falstaff ultimately resists being redeemed through coercion, Hal's rejection does leave him unable to articulate himself with the strength of his former verbal wit. Instead, Falstaff's verbal inability to further provide an alternative to the political reality of Hal's situation renders him a desecrated symbol on one hand and a dead man on the other. But like any good martyr, Falstaff continues to be powerful as an *idea*. Grady calls Falstaff “a foil for the cold, value-free, Machiavellian political world” (620) and the “thematic embodiment of resistance to power” (613). That doesn't change just because Falstaff is dead. Even as *Henry V* unfolds and Falstaff dies offstage, Shakespeare does not lead us to believe that “resistance is futile.” We never see Falstaff dead on stage, which causes the audience to experience a lack of finality and closure. Because of Falstaff's hidden death, it's hard to nail the coffin shut on this character forever. It helps that we don't want to either. Rather, we read Falstaff into the scenes in *Henry V* where his light subversion is most chillingly appropriate. Thus, resistance to power becomes the burden of the audience – a burden taken on because of our memory of and loyalty to Falstaff. Cued by Shakespeare, the audience continuously interpolates Falstaff into the play, which undermines, once again, honor and the gains that Hal makes as king.

Several parts of *Henry V* in which the tavern folks show up recall Falstaff's subversive argument against honor. One case, the boy's speech in act 3, scene 2, that rejects Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol, is a good example of how choosing the honorable path leads eventually to untimely death. Falstaff makes note of that very concept at Shrewsbury when he spies the corpse of Sir Walter Blunt, disguised at the king. “There's honor for you,” Falstaff says of the dead man. Back in *Henry V*, the boy, refusing to “pocket up wrongs,” first becomes Pistol's translator, and immediately after, inserts himself into the fatal position of guarding the “luggage.” The boy chooses to take the honorable path, and like Sir Walter, he ends up dead. Needless to say, Falstaff, on the other hand, lives a long life. Had Shakespeare not followed the literary conventions of death from grief that are found throughout early modern drama, it would be a good second guess to say that Falstaff, unlike any honorable character, dies from an illness complicated by *old age*. By contrast, Henry IV dies at the age of 46, Hal at the age of 36. Even John of Gaunt dies before his 60th birthday. We have to hearken back to Edward III to find a king who lives to age 65, and he is quite the anomaly.

A perhaps more interesting resurrection of Falstaff's subversion is in Hal's soliloquy on the night before Agincourt. When Hal condemns ceremony, noting that it can neither cure great men of their sickness, nor command the health of a beggar's knee, his metaphor instantly recalls Falstaff's condemnation of honor, which cannot “set a leg... Or an arm... Or take away the grief of a wound... [which means that] Honor hath no skill in surgery...” (5.1.130-1). Both speeches take issue with conventional values of the day and subvert the very things that society supposedly holds most dear. The pomp and display of ceremony are partially what Hal is disparaging, but also his idea of ceremony is linked to the respect, honor, and adulation a king is supposed to receive from his subjects. Falstaff's disillusionment with honor parallels Hal's critique of ceremony: “O Ceremony,” Hal says, “Show me but thy worth!” (4.1.244). It is here that Falstaff's influence is abundantly evident. Neither man buys into the traditional values that magically determine a man's worth based on his rank and his accomplishments. Yet Hal, as the king, has to reject his inward ambivalence toward the very things Falstaff rejects outright.

The fact that the English obliterate the French at Agincourt does nothing to undermine Hal's apprehension from the previous evening. We see in many of Shakespeare's kings that sleep is evasive, anxiety is pervasive, and that the combined stress of the previous two factors causes monarchs to be living, ticking time bombs. Many of Shakespeare's kings make similar speeches about the burden of kingship.⁶ They divest themselves of power by acknowledging the burden of it. In a way, Shakespeare's kings prove Falstaff's point – both that the better part of valor is discretion and that death will come more suddenly to those who go looking for honor. Honor, quite ironically, leads to ruin. Through Falstaff, the Machiavel is exposed as a fool – by seeking to increase his power via a teleological suspension of the ethical, Machiavels like the Lancasters create innumerable avenues of their own self-destruction.

When Shakespeare killed Falstaff, it could have been for any number of reasons, but I like to think that Falstaff's death wasn't a matter of expedience. Rather, in killing one of his most famous darlings, I believe that Shakespeare stealthily undermines the Machiavellian reformation of the prodigal Prince Hal, as well as his kingship. Falstaff's prior brushes with death set up the audience to believe he will never die, but when he does die, it's clear that Shakespeare wants us to remember Falstaff. The messages across *Henry V* keep coming – from the tavern-goers, from Bardolph's death, from Fluellen's reference to Hal's rejection, and from Hal himself. If Falstaff's catechism on honor is meant to be didactic, it may be that he had to die in order for us to listen to it without laughing.

Notes

1. According to *Slate*, “kill your darlings” has been attributed to Allen Ginsberg and William Faulkner, among other writers, but most likely comes from Arthur Quiller-Couch's Cambridge lectures on “The Art of Writing” from 1913-1914.

2. “Falstaff: Subjectivity between the Carnival and the Aesthetic.” *Modern Language Review* 96 (2001): 609-23. See also Harry Berger, Jr. “The Prince's Dog: Falstaff and the Perils of Speech Prefixity.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49.1 (1998): 40-73.

3. Act 3, scene 2, lines 21-3. *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1997. All references come

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offer fruitful venues for considering the interaction between literary form, theology, and even classical sources. Lawrence Manley's essay highlights theater history as another rich area of historicist scholarship on early modern drama. His careful recontextualization of *Richard III* within company repertoires brings the realities of playing and patronage to bear on the historical details included and emphasized within Shakespeare's play. He shows that an earlier version of *Richard III* and the first tetralogy of Shakespeare's history plays written for Lord Strange's Men emphasizes the Stanley family's legacy, whereas Shakespeare's *Richard III* for the Queen's Men is far more ambiguous about the Stanleys' contribution to the rise of the Tudors. Manley's essay offers a model for historicist work that is perhaps best suited to texts that are historical in genre: it matters more when the Earls are based on real Earls. But his discoveries validate inquiries into the conditions of playwriting and performance in early modern England.

One of the main tensions of the volume is the different meanings of historicism and presentism in early modern literary studies. Paul Stevens' contribution most thoroughly discusses presentism as a method poised to refute the central tenets of historicist, and especially New Historicist, methods. In Stevens' reading, presentist scholarship values the theoretical over the contextual, and the concerns of present practitioners are acknowledged to a fault. Stevens' comparison of *Eastward Ho* and *The Tempest*, however, performs a kind of parallel reading of two early modern plays to prioritize genre rather than to explicate the differences between historicist and presentist analysis, the purported claim of his essay. In fact, the volume's final section, "Gendering History," features essays by Laura Lunger Knoppers and Erin Murphy that far more successfully show the potential benefits of addressing present concerns within historicist criticism. Knoppers tracks the terms "generalissima" and "generalless" from their origins in civil war Parliamentary polemic, which criticized Queen Henrietta Maria and Margaret Cavendish's Royalist plays, to current political discourse surrounding Hillary Clinton and "the sisterhood of the travelling pantsuit." Indeed, militaristic rhetoric is a common trope for demonizing powerful women in the public limelight. The true revelations of Knoppers's essay come in her careful reconstruction of the archive of letters between Queen Henrietta Maria and King Charles I as well as her thoughtful readings of Cavendish's Lady Victoria as a revisionary character. But her powerful presentist framing offers new directions for considering the legacy of early modernity in our own time. Likewise, Murphy's essay, even more than Knoppers's, explicitly traces these links from early modernity to the present. By reading Cavendish and Mary Astell as women writing about and influenced by war through the legacy of Virginia Woolf's incomplete recovery of her foremothers, Murphy asks what the relationship between gender and writing in wartime might be today. She argues that feminist critics have always negotiated the relationship between a disinterested historicism and present interests, and this corner of the discipline has learned to keep in suspension the radical particularity of historical eras with longer historical through-lines. Knoppers and Murphy both demonstrate the rigor and value of explicitly presentist and historicist readings of early modern texts. Their essays might have been better grouped

under the banner of new directions for reassessing presentism rather than simply gender, regardless of the fact that they discuss texts written by and concerned with women.

The methodological reflections and institutional histories in the editors' introduction, Nigel Smith's afterword, and field-shaping essays by Hadfield, McKeon, Grossman, Fulton, Dzelzainis, Knoppers, and Murphy ensure that this collection will be required reading for early modern scholars of all stripes. Shakespeare scholars will be most interested in Hirschfeld's nuanced reading of satisfaction in *Othello* and Manley's thoughtful reconsideration of patronage and *Richard III*. Although this volume limits its focus to early modern literary studies, many of the essays, including Murphy's, bemoan the relegation of discussions about historicism to historical periods: since historicist methodology is prevalent in all corners of literary studies, scholars should have even more common ground to discuss method despite recognizing the radical temporal difference revealed by primary materials. The collections' focus on early modernity, however necessary, obscures other ways historicism is being rethought in literary studies more generally. As Smith suggests in his afterword, new formalisms contribute to historicist practice in early modern literary studies and beyond. A devoted new or historical formalist voice would have made a welcome addition to this volume. In addition, recent work in queer history that combines theory, intersectional gender studies, and feminism, as well as historicist method, has fundamentally challenged the positivistic categories that govern historicist pursuits. Of course, no volume can accomplish everything, but given the prominence of these trends it was surprising to hear so little of them in a discussion of the future of historicist method.



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4. "The Martyrdom of Falstaff." *Shakespeare Studies* 2.1 (1996): 174-191.

5. Although he has heard Hal's eulogy and may be wondering at its contents, Falstaff only reacts to Hal's promise to "embowel" him, which the Norton's notes explain could mean either disembowel, as one would a deer, or to have "prepared for embalming and burial as noblemen were" (1220, note 5). Falstaff takes the former definition to the extreme, saying that he would give Hal "leave to powder me, and eat me, too" (5.4.11). In a way, Hal does just that by using Falstaff as a mentor before chewing him up and spitting him out.

6. Including Henry IV, Henry VI, Richard II, and Richard III, for instance.

